

## Introducing SHAPE in Education

~ Dr Priyamvada Agarwal



In this article, we are in conversation with one of our teachers about the concept of S-H-A-P-E and how it is necessary to complement STEM in order to build a balanced future for the society, its economy and the environment at large.

***We have heard of the acronym STEM, which means Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics. Now there is something called SHAPE as well. What does it mean? Is it a new concept?***

SHAPE may seem relatively new compared to STEM, but what the concept or idea deals with is not new in the true sense. Like STEM, SHAPE is an acronym for Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts for People and the Economy. The British Academy<sup>1</sup> and UKRI (UK Research and Innovation)<sup>2</sup> initiated this effort to formally draw everybody's attention to the importance of these subjects in our world. It is not just sciences that are important. Social sciences, arts, and

<sup>1</sup> The British Academy is the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences. They mobilise these disciplines to understand the world and shape a brighter future. For more information, visit their site: <https://thisisshape.org.uk/>

<sup>2</sup> "Introducing SHAPE: Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts for People and the Economy." *Bulletin magazine*. Publication date July 28, 2020, <https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/bulletin-magazine/2020/07/28/introducing-shape-social-sciences-humanities-and-arts-for-people-and-the-economy/>. Date of access (April 06, 2021).

humanities are also significant for social and economic reasons. These subjects help us to “understand ourselves, others, and the human world around us.”<sup>3</sup>

***So is this the new thing that is replacing STEM? Tell us more about it.***

What organizations like The British Academy and UKRI along with institutes like the London School of Economics are trying to do is to make subjects that comprise SHAPE meet the same status and importance that STEM subjects enjoy. In other words, they are not trying to replace either. All they are trying to do is highlight the fact that SHAPE subjects teach individuals to analyse, interpret, create, communicate, collaborate – skills crucial for today’s world – which when combined with STEM gives an edge to the innovation that these subjects are striving for.

It is a common scenario in most households even today that the ultimate aim of a child or their parents is to make sure that the child becomes either a doctor or an engineer. We will all agree that these are not the only career choices and nor is everybody inclined to sciences or these professions only. Do people not have interests in SHAPE subjects? Can these subjects not hone higher order thinking skills? Can a person from a SHAPE background not contribute meaningfully to one’s society, workplace, and the world at large?

***That’s so true! We cannot deny that people studying history, political science, sociology, theatre, literature, etc. have very strong reasoning skills. For example, Kautilya, Panini, Bharat Muni, Aristotle, Amartya Sen, Noam Chomsky, Kalidasa – the list is endless. Then why do you think SHAPE subjects never enjoy the same importance?***



It is quite common to judge the value of a subject by the job options that are available, or the kind of salary a profession ensures. Doctors or engineers earn handsome salaries and enjoy a certain degree of job security because of which STEM subjects are preferred by many. But can we build a nation

just by building laboratories, hospitals, or dams? Is it possible to value or devalue a subject only by what it contributes to the economy of a country in measurable terms? Society needs both scientists and humanists to ensure the balance that a combination of these two disciplines bring in. Otherwise, robots would be enough to inhabit the earth. We all appreciate a good piece of music or a well-made visually appealing advertisement. Even during the time of the pandemic,



<sup>3</sup> <https://thisisshape.org.uk/>

while most of us were working from home, we either watched movies on the OTT platforms or read good books, or pursued a creative hobby, like painting, gardening, singing or even cooking. Our doctors and physicians took care of our physical health, and the occasional soothing music or an addictive book or an enjoyable film took care of our mental well-being. This shows that there are so many alternative professions one can aspire to get into after having studied subjects from the SHAPE domain. Civil Services is also one of them. There are many more such career options that one can follow, which can help one earn as well as contribute to society in non-scientific terms. What a student needs to understand is that job opportunities are not limited to any specific subject(s). The prerequisite is to develop expertise in one's chosen subject because every subject has immense scope in it. Rather it is not a subject's scope that opens up opportunities for jobs, but the expertise one has in the subject.

***Tell us about the benefits of studying subjects that come under SHAPE.***

Social sciences help us learn about civilizations, cultures, and social developments and how to accommodate them in our understanding of the larger world. The present and future cannot be made without the knowledge of the past. These subjects help in developing social behaviour, civic qualities, power of thinking and reasoning, the feeling of universal brotherhood, and other positive social values. It teaches us to accept every individual for what they are and not simply through a coloured lens that is widely accepted. SHAPE encourages the development of individuality which in turn brings plurality.



What is the ultimate purpose of life? What are the different means to attain it? Monetary means is just one side to it. Scientific temperament is just one aspect. There are many more layers to it. We need to broaden our horizons a little to understand how people with creative sensibilities have impacted humanity. For example, *Mahashweta Devi* has served people through her writings. *Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya* spread the message of patriotism through his literature. In the history of every nation, you can find out about people who have impacted the formation of political and social opinions through their writings.

***Does that mean studying subjects under the SHAPE domain help in all-round development of personalities?***

Absolutely!

***What does this imply in education?***

The thrust in education should be to encourage research in these disciplines, so that policymakers, strategists, and the public at large can be benefitted. Subjects under SHAPE also contribute to making society a better place to live in.

Nowadays, universities are offering courses like *Understanding Personalities, Identity through Popular Narratives; Indian Society: Continuities, Changes and Paradoxes; Introduction to Culture and Creative Expressions, Youth, Society, and Literature; Inclusion and Exclusion in Indian Education; Multiculturalism and its Relevance in Modern Society*; etc. It also means that the choice of subjects for students should not be compartmentalized into arts or science disciplines. For example, one should be allowed to combine physics and chemistry with sociology. The idea is to encourage interdisciplinary studies.

***What message would you give to those who think that a degree in any subject under SHAPE would not be worth the effort because the so-called ultimate aim of modern education is to be able to earn handsome money and there is no comparison to what people with STEM subjects earn?***

Every coin has two sides to it. It may not be fair to say that the degrees in SHAPE subjects are not as marketable as those from STEM subjects. We all now know the way the soft skills industry is on a boom. Any company while hiring a candidate looks for good communication skills. A candidate should be able to communicate clearly, confidently, and convincingly. A lack of it can result in no job at all, even if a candidate is a gold medallist from top notch institutes. In other words, a candidate with a degree in STEM needs to know how to market oneself, and that comes through an exposure to SHAPE subjects. All fields from law and government, to management and creative fields, require people from a humanities background because of their broad education, understanding of the nuances of the society, and the ability to research and think out of the box. So, it is important to have an interdisciplinary approach to studies.

***What are your suggestions to schools and educators at large?***

Schools should organize career counselling sessions by experts so that they can give the required exposure to students about the possible career options after choosing different subjects. Many students until college do not know about what interests them, what they would want to pursue further, what choices are available, what kind of career options exist, etc. These sessions should be organized at different grade levels in schools so that students can make informed choices in opting for subjects.

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## Lesson Plan: Introducing SHAPE in education

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It is important to understand why most students are interested in building careers only in medicine or engineering without knowing their own interests. Do they have enough exposure and knowledge about other areas of study, and the associated career options? Do they know where their interests lie? What is the right age to give this exposure to students? Most teachers would agree to have seen plenty of students who do not know what area of study to pursue. They eventually end up going with the flow of choosing subjects and disciplines their peers are opting for, or their parents think would be in their best interest.

Given the broad spectrum that SHAPE covers, here are some suggestions on practical ideas to develop awareness among students. This is a suggestive list, which can be built upon based on the different subjects. The intent behind these activities/ideas is to increase the possibilities of getting students to engage with different subjects and understand their relevance. These may be suitable for students of higher secondary to get some exposure about the relevance of SHAPE and make informed choice of subject. Avoid conducting these activities in isolation just as a part of co-curricular exercise. Follow it up with an associated subject-based discussion. Plan them in series at regular intervals so that students get time to absorb facts, enhance their exposure, and mull over their relevance.

1. Organise a debate for students to discuss the best form of government. Suggest that they focus their discussions around the why, which, and how it is better for society and humans.



2. Take them for a visit to a real or virtual museum and make history come alive for them. It will help students understand the value of lived experience of any social or historical event, appreciate the struggles of those who came before us, and acknowledge the importance of the role of a historian as well.



*City of Arts and Sciences in Valencia, Spain  
is a cultural and architectural complex.*

3. Help students enhance their communication skills to confidently and coherently express their views, irrespective of the language. Make such activities (school newspaper, class website, blogging, role plays, presentations, etc.) a part of their year-long curriculum. It is also important that students enhance their native language capabilities.

4. Encourage students to write or recite poems. Organise skits or theatre activities both for the love of art and to harness the value of theatricals in moulding public opinion.



5. Focus on art integrated education as recommended by NEP 2020 and capitalise on this opportunity to make students appreciate the value of art in life.
6. Institute a monthly book club. Let students read and share books.
7. Involve them in community service projects.
8. Elaborate on the relevance of budget, economics, data analysis, etc. For example, ask students to do a project on finance which will analyse the impact of coronavirus on their pocket money and expenditures. This can



be done with a small sample size even in online mode. Let students design a questionnaire and analyse the data. Teachers may assist the students in devising relevant questions. The focus is more on being able to do a data analysis, understand the value of data, and how similar kinds of activities are done on a broader scale in a family, society, and nation at large.

9. Organise picture walks by making students create posters on themes like:
  - a. 10 people who made a mark on humanity through their work in the field of art
  - b. Life and works of a noted historian
  - c. A day in the life of a social worker
  - d. Importance of learning money management for everyone

10. Call people from different subject related fields to deliver insightful lectures which can shed light on the relevance of SHAPE subjects.

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## Unperson (noun)



**Pronunciation:** /'ʌnpə:s(ə)n/

**Meaning:** A person whose name or existence is denied or ignored, especially because of a political misdemeanour

**Origin and additional information:** The word has a fairly recent and an interesting origin. It was coined by George Orwell in 1949 when he first used the word in the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

**Word section:** Orwell came up with the word to refer to someone who has been “vaporized”. Vaporization is a process by which an individual is secretly erased from existence in the present world or society. There will be no evidence of the person on books, photographs, official documents – in other words, all records to trace the individual get removed. Orwell drew this idea from the world he was living in, where individuals defying the state were constantly disappearing. However, the idea is still relevant now, especially when world citizens are grappling to determine what constitutes one’s identity. Is it simply the technical details like name, birth, location that is important, or does personal and more subjective information like gender, race, language, etc. also contribute to building one’s identity. Artificial Intelligence experts and practitioners are constantly experimenting and pushing the limits of how much of the human (or ‘humane’) can be replaced by technology. But the question to ask is does the world need technology and science to replace humans or the best way forward is to find a balance between what we have now come to understand as STEM and SHAPE.